

Oceanic Adventure of ‘Kon-Tiki’ Still Enthralls

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Rating: **4.0/5.0**

CHICAGO – Mention the name Thor Heyerdahl or his sea-faring vessel “Kon-Tiki,” and half-remembered images of a voyage across the sea in a ship that looks like it was built on “Gilligan’s Isle” might cross memory neurons. Why, when and how he did it is brought to screen in the excellent and appropriately titled “Kon-Tiki.”

In the name and hope of man’s innate instinct to explore, “Kon-Tiki” serves as a lesson for visionaries, and was nominated for Best Foreign Language Film at the recent Oscars. Thor Heyerdahl simply had a higher calling to see what is “out there” and prove a point while doing it. The film meticulously and lovingly recreates the journey of that haphazard boat, and crispy reproduces the particular time frame in which it was done. All the sharks, odd sea life, storms, challenges and triumphs are explored, as well as a nicely wrought examination from co-directors Joachim Ronning and Espen Sandberg, that this small floating speck on the ocean was part of a larger sea of expansiveness in the universe. It may take a long time to get there, but it all waits patiently for the adventurers willing to try.

Thor Heyerdahl (Pal Severre Hagen) is shown to be risk taker, as the film begins with a flashback in Norway circa 1920, with little Thor falling into freezing waters trying to leap onto ice floes. Cut to his adult life, when he spends time on a Polynesian island with his wife Liv (Agnes Kittelsen) and develops theories about the native people that run counter to prevailing wisdom. Heyerdahl believes that the islanders originally came from South America, floating to the islands on boats – using currents and the wind – over 1500 years ago.



Thor Heyerdahl (Pal Severre Hagen) in ‘Kon-Tiki’
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

He decides to recreate the journey of Tiki (the original explorer), using the materials that were available for such a journey back then. He recruits other adventurers named Herman Watzinger (Anders Baasmo Christensen), Knut Haugland (Tobias Santelman), Bengt Danielsson (Gustaf Skarsgard). Torstein Raaby (Jakob Oftebro) and Erik Hesselberg (Odd-Magnus Williamson). In 1947, they set sail from Peru on the “Kon-Tiki,” and prove that wherewithal can still rule the sea.

The film is so beautifully shot and composed, from the elements of 1946 Brooklyn, New York, to the vast and utterly inspiring sea of stars in the ocean skies. Directors Ronning and Sandberg have a reverence for the story, yet they never make Heyerdahl any more that who he was – a man with an itch for proving the conventional wisdom wrong and himself right. Heyerdahl’s continuous on-board admonition to keep having

“faith,” relates better than that emotion’s connection to God, for he literally wills that crude vessel across the ocean.

The “Kon-Tiki” crew are well cast. Without knowing the particulars of the story, it’s difficult to know if what was presented was absolute truth when it came to the reactions of that crew, but each of them represented a primal fear of doing such a foolhardy act. There is a stunning scene involving the Herman character, when he is baptized in blood. His breakdown from that stunning scenario is a telling lesson in how difficult it can be to maintain sanity in such isolation. These guys were heroes, but they were also human.

In the age of the computer generated image age, one the most pleasant aftereffects is how it can be utilized in a film like this one. The scenes of 1940s New York City are impeccable, and set up some colorful scenes of Heyerdahl trying to pitch his attempt to financiers. The connections of the mid-20th century to the crusty explorers of the 19th century are narrative gifts in the beginning of the film, starting with a bearded, peg-legged old salt at the Explorers Club in New York City. It was a foreshadowing of the joy in the camaraderie.



Adventure on the High Seas in 'Kon-Tiki'
Photo credit: The Weinstein Company

Also fascinating is the crossing, although its pace is a bit slow. The excitement is in the discoveries, such as electric eels, huge sea creatures and even the majesty of the journey’s mortal enemy, the shark. The men are alternately bored and incredulous, and are not afraid to question their leader and each other as to why they’re on that godforsaken vessel. It makes the passage more realistic, and the victory of the destination that much sweeter.

Heyerdahl passed away in 2002, safely in his late eighties. But as the epilogue notes, the legacy of the “Kon-Tiki” crossing had a rippling effect towards breaking the sound barrier, flying a rocket out of the atmosphere and putting a footprint on the moon. Within all that risk is where the rewards of “out there” are realized.

“Kon-Tiki” continues its limited release in Chicago on May 3rd. See local listings for theaters and show times. Featuring Pal Sverre Hager, Anders Baasmo Christiansen, Tobias Santelmann and Agnes Kittelsen. Screenplay adapted by Petter Skavlan. Directed by Joachim Ronning and Espen Sandberg. Rated “PG-13”



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